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Professor Gooch to explore the rhythm of retirement

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Summary: Daily patterns will change and new regularities will emerge, but a fascination with life remains constant.

(April 28, 2010)-Rhythms illustrate the career of Van Gooch, professor of biology, a Horace T. Morse-University of Minnesota Alumni Association Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education recipient. The tempo of the academic year cycles new students into his classroom and allows new teaching methods and ideas to be incorporated into coursework. Research on circadian rhythms, the internal clock of living things, provides challenge and discovery. With retirement this spring, daily patterns will change and new regularities will emerge, but a love for learning and a fascination with life will remain constant.

As a child, Gooch grew up in California, in Bay Area suburbs, collecting “critters.” It was no surprise that he majored in biology at California State University East Bay. There, he remembers, the cadence of crickets at his favorite lunch site inspiring his career-long research on biological timing mechanisms.

Arriving in Morris: 1976
Gooch completed a doctorate in biophysics at the University of California, Berkeley and a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University. With city life closing in and a desire to teach, Gooch applied for a temporary position at Morris in 1976. Robbie Abbott, now professor emeritus of biology, hired him—in the Philadelphia airport. Gooch and wife Sue packed a U-haul with belongings, including a snake, and drove to a rural town and state where they had never been before.

The Apple IIe computer was introduced just as Gooch started his academic career. Gooch saw the many values of a personal computer and was the first on campus to create exams with a computer. Lacking research space, he “commandeered a custodial closet” and he and Pete Falkum ’80 ran wires at midnight from the closet to his Apple IIe in his office.

In 1978, Gooch taught one year in the hills of Ohio at Hiram College, but he returned to Morris when hired for a tenured position. He came back for the prairie, for excellent staff like Audrey Ross and the late Lois Hogander, for teaching mentors like Tom Straw, former professor of biology, and especially for the students.

“I’ve spent time at Harvard, Berkeley, and Dartmouth, and I would put my Morris students up against those students anytime,” reflects Gooch. “I’ve always had good students, very enthusiastic.”

Nearly every biology major, pre-med, and pre-health student at Morris learned cellular basics from Gooch, the primary instructor for the foundational Cell Biology course for the last 34 years.

Research: Circadian rhythms
And over the years, more than 100 students conducted research with Gooch. They studied the daily cycles of organisms, known as circadian rhythms, primarily using a mold called Neurospora. Recently, a collaboration with colleagues at

Dartmouth resulted in a new procedure—inserting into Neurospora an “optimized” firefly luciferase gene, “built from scratch.” The artificial luciferase gene allows Gooch and his students to directly “see” the kinetics of different circadian genes. The procedure has been patented by the University of Minnesota and Dartmouth College.

Teaching with faculty across the campus

In addition to teaching great college students, Gooch also fondly remembers 19 years of teaching Human Reproduction and Biotechnology in the Summer Scholars program with Tom Turner, associate professor of Spanish, and Bill Campbell, director of grants development. “It was energizing to work with talented high school students tackling real life problems, to not be confined to one discipline, and to experiment with a variety of teaching styles,” says Gooch.

UMM was one of the first campuses to have a freshman critical thinking common course, Inquiry. “The close interaction with incoming first year UMM students in the Inquiry course was amazing,” shares Gooch, “as well as the interaction with faculty across the campus. I learned many different teaching styles and techniques.”

Gooch was pleased to serve on the pre-med committee and as Biology Club and Tri Beta Honor Society adviser, and to as the “snake man” when countless elementary children had their first chance to touch and hold a snake.

“Becoming a professor was ideal for me,” reflects Gooch, “because I could continue the learning process. Teaching is a great way to learn. Life continues to fascinate me. I am in awe of the diversity of life, from the organisms existing in the rocks of Antarctica to the ornate birds of the tropics. I am also continually amazed by the unity of life. The weirdest organism is still going to have DNA with the same code as me, and it will still be run by ATP.”

The pulse of the prairie has “gotten in my blood,” says Gooch. So, he and Sue will retire nearby in an eco-house now under construction, the first of its kind in west central Minnesota.

Celebration planned for May 22

A celebration for Gooch will be held at Pomme de Terre Park in Morris on Saturday, May 22, 2010, from 3 p.m. until dark. While not necessary, you may wish to add your name to the online attendees list.

Send memories and photos of Gooch via the online form, to alumni@morris.umn.edu, or to Alumni Relations and Annual Giving, Welcome Center, 600 East Fourth Street, Morris, Minnesota, 56267.

If you'd like to make a gift to the Van and Susan Gooch Biology Undergraduate Research Fund on the occasion of his retirement, make a gift online or contact the Office of Alumni Relations and Annual Giving at 320-589-6066.